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ABSTRACT

The Santa Cruz campus of the University of California has been using pass-fail grading coupled with written evaluations of the student's performance since it opened in 1965. The only exceptions to the pass-fail system are in nonintroductory undergraduate courses in biology, chemistry, mathematics and physics in which students may select the letter grade option. The rationale is that the admissions policies of some graduate and professional schools discriminate against the student with no letter grades. The pass-fail system has been considered a success. It tends to base the educational experience more naturally on the subject matter and the needs of the student, rather than distort learning through over emphasis on the instructor as evaluator and on the competitive letter grade he will award. It also bases the record of academic performance on the written evaluation of each instructor instead of on a single pseudo-quantitative letter. Two negative aspects of the pass-fail system are that there has been a steady increase in the number of courses that are so large that no evaluation is written, and that some graduate and professional schools have expressed difficulty in evaluating a Santa Cruz transcript. (AF)

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA ACADEMIC SENATE

SANTA CRUZ DIVISION

THE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATIONAL POLICY

REPORT ON GRADING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA CRUZ

THE GRADING SYSTEM AT UCSC--A CRITIQUE

Since it opened in 1965, the Santa Cruz Campus, operating under a variance from the University grading regulations, has had a campuswide policy of using pass/fail grading coupled with written evaluations of the student's performance in the course. Exceptions may be authorized for instructors of classes so large that their evaluations would be meaningless. Graduate students were letter-graded prior to September, 1969, but the only exception to the use of P/F plus evaluation now is in nonintroductory undergraduate courses in biology, chemistry, mathematics, and physics. At the request of the sponsoring Boards of Studies and on approval by the Committee on Undergraduate Courses, these courses have been granted a letter-grade option. This means that at the time of filing the study card for these courses, a student may elect to receive a letter grade plus evaluation, rather than a P/F plus evaluation. This choice, once made by the student, is irrevocable. The justification for the letter-grade option is that the admissions policies of some graduate and professional schools operate to the disadvantage of students with no letter grades. The academic transcript for a UCSC undergraduate now consists of his complete set of course grades and evaluations, or, if he wishes, only the set of course grades. All seniors must either pass a comprehensive examination in their major field(s) or submit a satisfactory senior thesis.

The grade of Pass at UCSC means that the work represents clearly satisfactory progress toward the B.A. degree (M.A. or Ph.D., in the case of graduate students). While there is no direct correlation between Santa Cruz grades and conventional letter grades, for undergraduates, the conventional grade of D ("barely passing") would lie below the pass/fail boundary, the grade of C above it. Instructors' written evaluations of student performance range from one-word euphemisms for conventional letter grades to several paragraphs of expressive prose. The typical complete UCSC under-graduate transcript runs from one to perhaps nine or ten pages, depending on the number of courses the student has taken at UCSC and the idiosyncrasies of his instructors.

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
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There is a fairly general consensus among students and faculty at Santa Cruz that the P/F plus evaluation system has been a success. The distortion of the educational experience caused by student anxiety over which letter grade he will receive is almost eliminated. One might presume that since the evaluation at Santa Cruz is in fact a very probing grade, the "reward" of good evaluations would motivate students in the same neurotic way the letter grade "reward" system does. This proves not to be true in practice. Students are indeed interested in their evaluations; they read them and think about them. But they feel more nearly free to gauge the amount and direction of work for each course by their own choice and motivation. The student focusses less on the instructor and on the grade that instructor might give; he focusses more on the material of the course and its importance to him. While students can and still do compare their work with each other, competition more often takes the form of doing one's best for a class in which there is special interest, rather than doing just enough to get a particular grade.

Students at Santa Cruz work as hard or perhaps harder than most students at most major universities. True, some do not learn a great deal during their stay at UCSC; however, our feeling is that this problem reflects human nature more than our particular grading system. Persons familiar with student performance in courses taken under individual pass/fail options at predominantly letter-graded institutions are ill-advised to generalize from this experience. If a campus retains letter grades and the grade-point average, students know that "the money lies with the letter-graded courses." They will naturally, then, treat their pass/fail course as a hobby which must be slighted if the demands from the letter-graded courses become too severe. The time goes "where the money is." Only by abandoning letter grading can the currency of "a good education' take over from the currency of "a good grade-point average."

The P/F plus evaluation system leads to a significant change in student attitude and morale. The instructors appear to be more on the students' side, more like resources for the aid of the students and less like stern judges. Although UCSC has no honor system governing academic dishonesty, cheating is almost unheard of by either students or faculty, and proctoring of examinations can be done in a most informal manner with complete confidence on both sides. Many at Santa Cruz feel that this improved morale and lack of cheating is sufficient by itself to justify the abandonment of traditional grading methods.

The P/F plus evaluation system also changes the experience of the instructors. Students are viewed more nearly as human beings rather than being stereotyped as "an A-student" or "a C-student," etc. It is possible for instructors to make assignments in classes which would be very hard to letter-grade, but which have salutary educational effects. Although writing evaluations is time-consuming and taxing, there are instances where it reduces instructor anxiety. For example, a student's performances in the lecture and laboratory portions of a science course may be evaluated separately, without the task of combining them into a single letter grade.

For internal campus use, the set of course evaluations has proved of greater use than simply a set of letter grades or a conventional grade-point-average. The evaluations often contain information useful in advising and counseling students. They facilitate the selection of students to be awarded academic honors or awards. They also have proved most helpful in the vexing decisions of academic warnings and dismissals. A single grade of F places an undergraduate on academic warning for the next quarter. Two grades of F in the same term, one in each of two successive terms, or three F grades compiled at UCSC make him subject to dismissal. The dismissal decision is made on the basis not only of the set of pass/fail grades, but also on the set of evaluations. The promise of a late-blooming or temporarily troubled student may appear in these evaluations and provide the basis for a decision to retain him further in the University, a decision which might have been impossible if based on letter grades alone.

There is no evidence that the academic standards set and maintained under the P/F plus evaluation system are in any sense below those used with conventional grading. The student, in fact, may be better able to profit from the feedback he gets from the instructor, since he need not focus on the impact that information will have on his grade. Students are every bit as able to base career and other decisions on their evaluations as on any other kind of grades.

Outstanding students sometimes achieve more recognition for their work, and are motivated perhaps to work harder, because an outstanding evaluation carries a greater distinction than an A in a class where a large number of A's might be given out. Conversely, good students who would earn A's and B's at other campuses often receive insipid evaluations similar to those received by weaker students. In reading through a set of evaluations, unfavorable ones may assume undue importance, perhaps because the reader is accustomed to conventional letters of recommendation, from which unfavorable comments are carefully pruned. This phenomenon may injure Santa Cruz students unfairly, though it may diminish in importance as those who read our transcripts become more familiar with our students.

Some of these problems derive from the variety of purposes different instructors perceive for their written evaluations. Some write them as if they were to be read by graduate school admissions committees; others write very critical evaluations intended to help the student improve the quality of his future work but which may look bad on the student's transcript. We still are troubled by instructors who evaluate human beings or personalities, rather than performance in class. The Committee on Educational Policy sends a letter to all instructors each quarter discussing some of these problems. There has been noticeable improvement in the quality of written evaluations over the last four years.

A major challenge to any innovative grading system is how it succeeds in the "predictive" function--aiding prospective employers and graduate or professional schools in their hiring or admissions procedures. The bulk of research indicates that conventional grading systems are seriously deficient in the predictive function, despite the extraordinary reliance placed upon them, especially within the academic community.* There is almost nothing to indicate that academic success as measured by grades foretells future success, however that success is measured. Members of the academic community should view these research findings as a serious challenge to their methods of operating. However, if any grading system might have predictive utility, the P/F plus evaluation system should be among the best. One of its better features is that it makes computation of grade-point averages impossible. Overuse of the grade-point average as a single, convenient, quantitative measure of student "competence" is a widely perceived evil of the American educational system. Still, one encounters objections to written course evaluations as "patently subjective and of poor quality," while letter grades are seen as "accurate" or "quantitative." The very objection illustrates one of the dangers of letter grades--their pseudo-objectivity. After all, the instructor whose written evaluations of a student is "subjective" or "of poor quality" is the same person who would assign a "B" were the course letter-graded. Unfortunately, the "B" conceals the subjectivity inherent in the evaluation; and, in addition, with only the "B" there is no way to evaluate the evaluator and the content of the course, something the written evaluation permits, to some extent. Out of a conventional academic transcript arises a numerical grade-point average. Out of the few pages of a Santa Cruz transcript arises a picture of a flesh-and-blood human being--uneven, multi-dimensional, qualitative, unpredictable, incapable of summarization.

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*For example, see Donald P. Hoyt, "College Grades and Adult Accomplishment, A Review of Research," Educational Record, Winter, 1966, p. 70.

Granted, such creatures are hard to compare with others in close competition for scarce resources, but the problem is rooted in the nature of humans, rather than in a grading system. We would not try to sum up the effectiveness of one of our colleagues in the university community by either an "A" or by a "3.6."

In summary, based on our experience with the P/F plus evaluation grading system, we are convinced that it tends to base the educational experience more naturally on the subject matter and the needs of the student rather than distort that experience through over-focussing on the instructor as evaluator and on the competitive letter grade he will award; and that it bases the record of academic performance on the written evaluation of each instructor rather than forcing the summation of the performance into a single pseudo-quantitative letter.

There are probably two threats to the use of P/F plus evaluations at UCSC. There has been a steady increase in the fraction of courses students take that are so large that no evaluation is written. Some students may soon be finding their transcripts so abbreviated as to jeopardize their futures. There then might arise pressure to introduce letter grading in large courses. However, it would seem that if an instructor of a large class could meaningfully assign letter grades, he could meaningfully assign brief written evaluations. Thus, a determination on this campus to preserve its grading system might overcome this threat.

The second threat stems from the difficulties some graduate and professional schools have in evaluating a Santa Cruz transcript. Some of these schools have expressed their pleasure at UCSC transcripts--they have always sought to find out who the person was that lurked behind those A's and B's. Some, however, have expressed frustration at their inability to compare some "quantitative" measure of UCSC student performances. Some have gone so far as to express exasperation at having to read a several page transcript. So far, experience indicates that most qualified UCSC graduates manage to gain admission, financial aid, and scholarships for their postgraduate work. They may have trouble getting into the particular institution on which they have set their hearts. Thus, they need to broadcast their applications more widely than had they been conventionally graded. It may be that some graduate and professional schools, in their search for "objective" admissions criteria, may rely more heavily on standardized tests (e.g., medical aptitude, graduate record exam, etc.) to evaluate applicants from UCSC than from conventionally graded institutions. Some probably fare better, some probably worse, under the Santa Cruz system; the break is a different one from what it would be if UCSC letter-graded. However, there is no reason to suppose that the justice or equity necessarily rests with the letter-graded systems.

This is a time when universities are increasingly questioning the educational effectiveness and the humanitarianism of almost all of their traditional ways of doing things; it is also a time when self-motivated excellence among young people is widely sought and sorely needed. Thus, it would be unfortunate indeed if refusals to consider UCSC graduates on their merits because of their unorthodox transcripts forced Santa Cruz to change and adopt grading practices in which its students and faculty did not believe. Hopefully, there will be a growing nationwide recognition that "objective" and "quantitative" grading systems are not what they claim to be and that the conventional grading system seriously distorts the educational process.

MISCELLANEOUS COMMENTS ON GRADING

In a very few instances at UCSC, it has been rumored that instructors have automatically either passed all students in a class or passed all male students (due to pressure from draft boards). This procedure would probably be condemned by both faculty and students, except perhaps the passing of all students in a clearly experimental educational situation. In a few instances,students have been invited to contribute self-evaluative comments to their written course evaluation. The evaluation system at Santa Cruz permits this in a natural way, so long as the instructor makes a clear distinction between his evaluation and the student's self-evaluation. It has been suggested that this procedure be formalized, but no action is likely soon.

There is no formal procedure at UCSC for students to appeal grades or evaluations with which they are dissatisfied. The Committee on Educational Policy could hear a petition for change of grade from a student, based on the grounds of its being given on other than academic criteria. A decision of the Committee on Educational Policy could be appealed to the Division. There seems to be a vague consensus that some formal procedure should be established to handle these cases should they arise. The faculty of a student's College is currently authorized to exclude portions of written course evaluations from students' transcripts if in its judgment the portions are uninformative or irresponsible. Students who are particularly upset about some aspect of an evaluation can therefore take the matter up with the appropriate College body.

Serious proposals have been made at Santa Cruz to delete the grade of F, and to keep only a Pass plus evaluation system. This change would be especially easy to accomplish at UCSC, since all courses have equal weight and the extent of a student's progress could be measured by the number of courses he passes.

Various proposals have been made regarding the content of the undergraduate transcript. A motion was defeated by the Division in the Spring of 1969 to let a student choose, if he wished, at the time of filing his study cards, one course per quarter whose evaluation should not be included on his transcript. The idea, however, has not been laid to rest.

Despite the anxiety of a number of UCSC students and their parents that their lack of letter grades prejudices their opportunities to enter the graduate or professional school of their choice, considerable sentiment exists on the campus to abolish or phase out the letter-grade option. The option is viewed as an equivocation or compromise with what is felt to be superior educational policy. At the moment, however, there seems a consensus that more experience is needed under the present option. Only a small fraction of UCSC students ever take a course for a letter grade; those who do do not seem to be working harder in their letter-graded courses than in their others. The option might possibly die from lack of use.

There is general recognition at Santa Cruz that one thing a student may properly ask of his campus is some way to compile a record of accomplishment for external use which will permit him to do things in the future that he will want to do. Some kind of academic transcript is in all likelihood going to serve this function. The UCSC community will continue to seek to find the kind of record that does justice to the student, is fair to the outside world who will use that record, and which does not unduly twist the educational experience of the student.

SUGGESTED ROLE OF THE STATEWIDE ACADEMIC SENATE IN GRADING

Increased experimentation in grading is inevitable and desirable Responsibility to oversee these experiments should rest with the Divisions; Divisions can and must be entrusted to protect the interests of the students in the University system. Statewide regulations dealing with grading should be abolished. In their place should be established means whereby information on grading systems used and tried on the several campuses with evaluations of their effectiveness be made available continually to students, faculty, and administrators of all the campuses. Perhaps the University Committee on Educational Policy should correlate this information through reports from the various campuses.

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